

# Help! The Kalama Sutta, Help!

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(translated by Santikaro Bhikkhu)

All people in the world, including the Thai people, are now in the same situation as were the Kalama people in Kesaputta township, India, during the time of the Buddha. Their village was in a location through which many religious teachers frequently passed. Each of these teachers taught that his personal doctrine was the only truth, and that all others before and after him were wrong. The Kalamas could not decide which doctrine they should accept and follow. When the Buddha once visited their village, the Kalamas brought up their problem with him: they did not know which teacher to believe. Consequently, the Buddha taught them what is now known as the *Kalama Sutta*, which we will examine here.

Nowadays, worldly people study many different approaches to economic, social, and technological development. The universities teach just about everything. Then, regarding spiritual matter, here in Thailand alone we have so many teachers, so many interpretations of the Buddha's teachings, and so many meditation centers that nobody knows which teaching to accept or which practice to follow. Thus, it can be said that we have fallen into the same position as the Kalamas were in two millennia ago.

The Buddha taught them, and us, not to accept or believe anything immediately just because it fits with any of a number of criteria. He listed ten such criteria for them to be wary of, so they could avoid becoming anyone's intellectual slave, even of the Buddha Himself. This principle enables us to choose for ourselves the teachings that are truly capable of quenching suffering (*dukkha*). The ten examples the Buddha gave in the *Kalama Sutta* follow.

## 1. *Ma anussavena*:

Don't accept and believe something to be true just because it has been passed along and retold for many years. Such credulity is a characteristic of brainless people, of "sawdust brains," such as those in Bangkok who once believed that disasters would befall people born in the "ma" years. (The years of the small snake, big snake, horse, and goat – five through eight in the old twelve-year Thai cycle – all begin with "ma.")

## 2. *Ma paramparaya*:

Don't believe in something merely because it has become a traditional practice. People tend to imitate what others do and then pass the habit along, as in the story of the rabbit that was terrified by a fallen mango (like Chicken Little's falling sky). When the other animals saw the rabbit running at top speed, they were frightened too and ran after it. Most of them ended up tripping and tumbling off a cliff to their deaths. Any *vipassana* (insight) practice that merely imitates others, that just follows traditions, will bring similar results.

## 3. *Ma itikiraya*:

Don't accept and believe something simply because of reports and news of it spreading far and wide, whether through one's village or throughout the whole world. Only fools are susceptible to such rumors, for they refuse to exercise their own powers of intelligence and discrimination.

## 4. *Ma Pitakasampadanena*:

Don't accept and believe something just because it is cited in a *pitaka* (text). The word "*pitaka*," although most commonly used for Buddhist scriptures, can mean anything written or inscribed on a suitable writing material. The teachings memorized and passed on orally should not be confused with *pitaka*. A *pitaka* is a certain kind of conditioned thing made and

controlled by human beings, which can be improved or changed by human hands. Thus, we cannot trust every letter and word we read in them. We need to use our powers of discrimination to see how these words can be applied to the quenching of suffering. There are discrepancies among the *pitaka* of the various Buddhist schools, so care is called for.

### **5. *Ma takkahetu:***

Don't believe something solely on the grounds of logical reasoning (*takka*). Logic is merely one branch of knowledge that people use to try to figure out the truth. *Takka* or Logic is not infallible. If its data or inferences are incorrect, it can go wrong.

### **6. *Ma nayahetu:***

Don't believe or accept something merely because it appears correct on the grounds of *Naya* or what is now called "philosophy." In Thailand, we translate the Western term philosophy as *prajna*. Our Indian friends cannot accept this because "*naya*" is just a point of view or opinion; it isn't the supreme understanding properly referred to as *panya* or *prajna*. *Naya* or *nayaya* is merely a method of deductive reasoning based on hypotheses or assumptions. Such reasoning can err when the method or hypothesis is inappropriate.

### **7. *Ma akaraparivitakkena:***

Don't believe or accept something simply because of superficial thinking, that is, because it appeals to what we nowadays call "common sense," which is merely snap judgments based on one's tendencies of thought. We like to use this approach so much that it becomes habitual. Some careless and boastful philosophers rely on such common sense a great deal and consider themselves clever.

### **8. *Ma ditthinijjhanakkhantiya:***

Don't believe accept something to be true merely because it agrees or fits with one's preconceived opinions and theories. Personal views can be wrong and our methods of experiment and verification may be inadequate, neither of which lead us to the truth. This approach may seem similar to the scientific method, but can never actually be scientific, as its proofs and experiments are inadequate.

### **9. *Ma bhabbarupataya:***

Don't believe something just because the speaker appears believable, perhaps due to credibility or prestige. Outside appearances and the actual knowledge inside a person can never be identical. We often find that speakers who appear creditable outwardly turn out to say incorrect and foolish things. Nowadays, we must be wary of computers because the programmers who feed them data and manipulate them may put in the wrong information, make programming errors, or use them incorrectly. Don't worship computers so much, for doing so goes against this principle of the *Kalama Sutta*.

### **10. *Ma samano no garu ti:***

Don't believe something simply because the monk (more broadly, any speaker) is "my teacher." The Buddha's purpose regarding this important point is that nobody should be the intellectual slave of anybody else, not even the Buddha Himself. The Buddha emphasized this point often, and there were disciples, such as the Venerable Sariputta, who confirmed it in practice. They didn't believe the Buddha's words immediately upon hearing them; they only did so after reasoned reflection and the test of practice. See for yourselves whether there is any other religious teacher in the world who has given this highest freedom to his disciples and listeners! In Buddhism there is no dogmatic system that pressures us to believe without the right to examine and decide for ourselves. This is the greatest uniqueness of Buddhism that keeps its practitioners from being anybody's intellectual slave. We Thais should never volunteer to follow the West as slavishly as we are doing now. Intellectual and spiritual freedom is best.

## **Intellectual freedom**

The ten examples of the *Kalama Sutta* are a surefire defense against intellectual dependence and not being one's own person, that is, neglecting one's own intelligence and

wisdom in dealing with what one hears and listens to (*paratoghosa*, the "sound of others," in Buddhist terms). Whatever one listens to, one should carefully and systematically reflect upon it. When the facts of the matter are clearly beneficial and it results in the quenching of suffering, one may finally believe it one-hundred per cent.

The principle of the *Kalama Sutta* is appropriate for everyone, everywhere, every era, and every world, even for the heavenly worlds. Nowadays, the world has been shrunk by miraculous communications, by the easy and rapid exchange of information. People can get new knowledge from every direction and corner of the planet. In the process, they don't know what to believe and, therefore, are in the same position as were the Kalamas during the time of the Buddha. Indeed, the *Kalama Sutta* can be their refuge. Please give it the good attention and study it deserves. Consider it the greatest good fortune that the Buddha taught this *Sutta*. It is a gift for the whole world. Only those who are too foolish will be unable to benefit from this Discourse of the Buddha.

The *Kalama Sutta* is to be practiced by people of all ages. Even children can apply its principle in order to be children of awakening (*bodhi*) rather than children of ignorance (*avijja*). Parents should teach and train their children to know how to understand the words and instructions they receive, how to see the reasoning and natural facts involved, and whether the results will really be as claimed. Whenever teaching or telling their children something, parents should help them to really understand what they are asked to do and see the benefits for themselves. For example, when telling them not to take drugs, the children shouldn't obey merely because of fear, but because of seeing what the results of taking drugs actually are and thus willingly refuse addictive substances.

None of the ten examples in the *Kalama Sutta* state that children should never believe or listen to anyone. They simply state that children, along with the rest of us, should listen carefully and only believe something to be true after having seen for themselves its real meaning and the advantages that will come from such belief, then practice accordingly. When a teacher teaches something, helping children to see the reasoning behind the teaching won't make them obstinate. For the obstinate ones, gently apply a bit of stick and let them think things over again. Children will increasingly understand and appreciate the principle of the *Kalama Sutta* as they mature. They will accomplish all ten examples by the time they are fully mature adults, if we train children by this standard.

Today's scientific world will be able to gladly accept all ten tenets of the *Kalama Sutta* as being in line with the scientific method. There is not the least contradiction between the principles of science and those of the *Kalama Sutta*. Even the eighth item, which states that one should not accept something just because it corresponds with one's own preconceived theories, does not contradict scientific principles. True scientists emphasize experimental verification as their main criterion for accepting something as true, not personal opinions, concepts, beliefs, reasoning, and theories. Due to these standards of the *Kalama Sutta*, Buddhism will satisfy the expectations and needs of true scientists.

If one follows the principle of the *Kalama Sutta*, one will have independent knowledge and reason with which to understand the meaning and truth of ideas and propositions heard or read for the first time. For example, when one hears that greed, hatred, and delusion are dangerous and evil, one understands thoroughly and instantly, because one already knows through personal experience what these things are like. One believes in oneself rather than the speaker. The way of practice is the same in other cases. If a statement is about something one has never seen or known before, one should try to understand or get to know it first. Then one can consider whether or not to accept the newly received teaching or advice. One should never accept something just because one believes in the speaker. One should take one's time, even if it means dying before finding out. This is how the *Kālāma Sutta* protects one from becoming the intellectual slave of anyone else, even in the most subtle matters and so-called "mysteries."

There's a problem every time a new kind of medicine comes out and is advertised all over the place. Should we offer ourselves as guinea pigs to test it, out of belief in the advertisements? Or should we wait until we have sufficient reason to try just a little of it first, to see if it truly gives the good results advertised, before relying on it fully? We should respond to new statements and teachings in the same way we respond to new medicines, by following the principle of the *Kalama Sutta* as a true refuge.

The *Kalama Sutta* requires us to develop wisdom before faith. If one wants to have faith come first, then let it be the faith that begins with wisdom, not the blind faith that comes

from ignorance. The same holds true in the principle of the Noble Eightfold Path: take wisdom or right understanding as the starting point, then faith grows out of that wisdom or right understanding. This is the only safe approach. We ought never to believe blindly immediately upon hearing something, nor should we be forced to believe out of fear, bribery, or the like.

The world nowadays is so overwhelmed by the power of advertising and propaganda that most people have become slaves to it. They can make people pull out their wallets without even thinking in order to buy things they don't need to eat, don't need to have, and don't need to use. This is so commonplace that we absolutely must offer the principle of the *Kalama Sutta* to our human comrades of this era. Propaganda is much more harmful than ordinary advertising or what is called "*paratoghosa*" in Pali. Even with ordinary advertising or *paratoghosa*, we must rely on the principle of the *Kalama Sutta* as our refuge, to say nothing of needing it to deal with outright propaganda, which is full of intentional deceptions. So we can say that the *Kalama Sutta* is beneficial even in solving economic problems.

I ask you all to consider, investigate, and test whether there is found anywhere greater spiritual freedom than is found in the *Kalama Sutta*. If someone says that Buddhism is a religion of freedom, can there be any reason to dispute or oppose that statement? Does this world which is so intoxicated with freedom really know or have freedom in line with the principle of the *Kalama Sutta*? Do blind ignorance and indifference regarding the *Kalama Sutta* create the lack of such freedom? Some even disparage this Sutta by claiming it teaches us to not believe or listen to anything. Moreover, some actually claim that the Buddha preached this Sutta only for the Kalama people there at that time. Why don't we open our eyes and notice that people nowadays have become intellectual and spiritual slaves, that they have lost their freedom much more than the Kalamas in the time of the Buddha? Dear friends, fellow worshippers of freedom, I ask you to consider carefully the essence and aim of the *Kalama Sutta* and the Buddha's intention in teaching it. Then, your Buddhist qualities of awakening will grow fat and robust, rather than skinny and weak. Don't foolishly fear and loathe the *Kalama Sutta*. The word "Thai" means "freedom." What kind of freedom are you going to bring to our "Thainess"? Or what kind of "Thainess" is fitting and proper for the independence or "Thainess" of Buddhists, the disciples of the Buddha?

### **Avoiding clashes through openmindedness**

Now let us look further to see the hidden benefits and advantages in the *Kalama Sutta*. The Sutta can help us to avoid the tactless and narrow-minded talk that leads to violent clashes and disputes. For example, it is foolish to set up an unalterable rule for all families regarding who, husband or wife, will be the front legs (leader) and who the hind legs of the elephant. It all depends on the specific conditions of each family. According to the principles in the *Kalama Sutta* and the law of Specific Conditionality (*idappaccayata*), we only can discuss the proper roles of family members on the basis of each family's circumstances. Please don't speak one-sidedly and violate natural principles.

Regarding abortion, people argue until they are red in the face whether it is right or wrong, without investigating to discover in which cases it is suitable and which not. Once we follow the natural principles of the Buddhist way of reasoning, each situation will show us when it is appropriate and when not. Please stop insisting on one-sided positions.

The principle is the same in the case of meat eating versus vegetarianism. Each side pigheadedly argues from its absolute position. Such people are attached to regarding food as being either meat or vegetable. For Buddhists, there is neither meat nor vegetable; there are only natural elements. Whether the eater or the eaten, it's all just natural elements. The situations in which one should eat meat and the circumstances when one shouldn't can be discerned using the principle of the *Kalama Sutta*. For this reason, the Buddha never said decisively one way or the other whether to eat meat or vegetables, or to never eat meat or never eat vegetables. To speak so carelessly is not the way of Buddhists.

Nor should one say that democracy is always and absolutely good. Those who insist on such views haven't considered that a democracy of selfish people could be worse than a dictatorship of unselfish people who live according to Dhamma or righteousness. A democracy of selfish people means freedom to use their selfishness in a most frightening and awful manner. Consequently, problems drag on endlessly among those people who have a democracy of selfishness. Stop saying that democracy is absolutely good or that dictatorship is absolutely good. Instead, stick to the principle that either will be good when based on Dhamma. Each society should choose which suits it best according to the particular

circumstances facing it.

To say that the Prime Minister must always be an elected member of Parliament and never someone who was not chosen directly by the people is to rant and rave as if deaf and dumb.<sup>1</sup> Really, we must look to see how the situation ought to be, what the specific circumstances and reasons are, then practice correctly according to the principle of Specific Conditionality. The same applies to other political issues. This is the true Buddhist way, befitting the fact that Buddhism embodies democracy in the form of Dhammic socialism. Therefore, the election of members of parliament, the establishment of a government, the structuring of the political system, and even the course of social and economic development all should be carried out using the principle of the *Kalama Sutta*. Please consider each example and you will discover the necessity of using the principle of this Sutta.

More than ever the modern world needs the *Kalama Sutta* as its basic operating principle. The world is spinning ever faster with humanity's defilements. It's shrinking because of better transportation and communication. And it's about to self-destruct because proper awareness, intelligence, and wisdom are lacking. Under the power of defilement, the world is worshipping materialism, sex, and luxury because it lacks standards like that of the *Kalama Sutta*. No one knows how to make choices in line with its principles. Consequently, the world is wholly unfit for peace, while increasing in crime and other wickedness every moment. Let's eliminate all these problems and evils by relying on the *Kalama Sutta* as our standard.

Finally, there is the matter of the name of this Sutta. When named after the people who originally listened to this teaching, it's called the *Kalama Sutta*. When named after the place where it was preached, it's called the *Kesaputta Sutta*.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the name, the content and meaning is still the same. During the early part of the last century the *Tipitaka* was popularized in a series called "Dhamma Treasure" (*Dhammasampatti*).<sup>3</sup> Then, this Sutta became well-known as the *Kalama Sutta*. Therefore, let's yell at the top of our lungs, "Help! *Kalama Sutta*, help!"

In conclusion, the *Kalama Sutta* never forbids us to believe in anything; it merely implores us to believe with independent intelligence and wisdom. It never forbids us to listen to anything; it merely asks us to listen without letting our intelligence and wisdom be enslaved. Furthermore, it also enables us to think, consider, investigate, and decide with great subtlety and precision, so that we can find specks of gold in mountain-sized rubbish heaps.

Please come, *Kalama Sutta*! Come invest yourself in the hearts and minds of all Buddhists, of all human beings, in the present world.

*Mokkhabalarama*  
April 6, 1988

#### Footnote

Kalama 1. Up until the mid 1990s, this issue was a dangerous point of contention between democracy activists on one hand and the military and conservatives on the other.

Kalama 2. Different editions of the *Tipitaka* name this Sutta differently.

Kalama 3. By the Venerable Phra Mahasamanachao Kromphraya Vachiraya Nyanarorot, the Supreme Patriarch at the time who modernized Buddhist texts and education in Thailand.

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